

Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy
China in the World Podcast
Episode 57: Taiwan's 2016 Elections and Cross-Strait Relations
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Guest: Shelley Rigger

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From the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center in Beijing, China, this is the China in the World Podcast hosted by Paul Haenle.

Haenle: I'm here with Shelley Rigger from Davidson College to talk about Taiwan. Thank you, Shelley, for participating in our podcast. We are glad we convinced her to come to Beijing in advance of the elections next month in Taiwan to talk about the elections and also—in that context—the future direction of cross-Strait relations. Shelley, thank you for joining this week and also for joining our podcast.

Rigger: My pleasure! Thanks for having me.

Haenle: So let's turn right away to the elections in Taiwan, which will take place on January 16. You'll be going as an observer in your own capacity to watch the elections and you've been before and seen elections before. Can you give us your assessment of the likely outcome this go-around of the elections, and explain some of your analysis and your reasons for that? Thank you.

Rigger: Sure. I think the general consensus is pretty strong that in the presidential election we're looking at a very high probability of a DPP—Democratic Progressive Party—victory. Tsai Ing-wen, the DPP candidate, is leading strongly in the polls—double-digit lead—over her closest competitor, that would be Eric Chu from the KMT [Kuomintang]. But what's more interesting in some ways, and more controversial, is the likely outcome of the legislative elections which are happening on the same day, on January 16. There are 113 seats up for grabs, 73 of those in single-member districts, and it is still not clear whether either of the two major parties—DPP and KMT—will get the 57 seats needed for a majority, but I think the general consensus is that we're more and more confident that the DPP will either get a majority outright or that it will come close enough that it can form a coalition with a couple of independent or small party representatives and form a majority. So that's the real mystery that we're watching for as the election approaches.

Haenle: So likely Tsai Ing-wen victory, potentially a majority DPP in the LY (Legislative Yuan). As you know, I served in the National Security Council as the China Director, and a portion of that time Taiwan had a DPP president—President Chen Shui-bian. And cross-Strait relations were pretty tense in that time period. I've heard you say this week that even under a Tsai Ing-wen victory you don't anticipate a return to those dynamics, but what do you see the implications are for cross-Strait relations under a DPP president?

Rigger: Right. Tsai Ing-wen and the DPP today are certainly a far cry from 2000. In 2000, the DPP victory was not predicted. It was a much closer election. I think the DPP itself was not terribly well-prepared for governing, in large part because they had been completely shut out of the political system by the KMT up to that point, so that wasn't really entirely the DPP's fault that its politicians were pretty, relatively inexperienced. But they are much more experienced today and the leadership of the party is much more connected to people in the United States, in the mainland, and throughout Taiwan's society, so that I think that they're better able and more ready to manage cross-Strait relations. And I also think the folks here in Beijing are more ready for a DPP leadership in Taiwan.

First of all, they've had a few years to get used to the idea, and second of all, the predictions and the way the election's shaping up has kind of forced them to confront the likely outcome being DPP leadership.

Haenle: It was much more of a surprise to them in 2000, wasn't it? Because of James Soong creating a third party.

Rigger: Right, and it was really close in 2000. And what happened in 2000 was the traditional KMT vote was split. Had the KMT been united behind one candidate or the other, they would have won handily. Chen Shui-bian was elected with 39 percent of the vote to 37 percent for James Soong. So it was really close and I think it came as surprise to everyone including, in some ways, to Chen himself. I think he was hoping he would win, but I don't think he was confident that he would win.

So there's just a lot more context now and people are already thinking and planning and talking and communicating and trying to get a handle on how to ensure that the relations don't deteriorate. That said, though, Tsai Ing-wen is not nearly as enthusiastic about cross-Strait economic and political relations as her predecessor—the current President Ma Ying-jeou—is and the mainland government is not at all enthusiastic about a DPP leadership. The DPP still has Taiwan independence as a stated goal—not in the near term. Tsai Ing-wen has said her goal as president would be to maintain the status quo, which is neither independence nor unification. But ideologically, the DPP is far from the preferred positions of the PRC government. So there's room for excitement.

Haenle: So in that sense—the way you've described Tsai Ing-wen—does that in some ways put her potentially in a stronger and maybe even in a better position to be engaging the mainland, in that the domestic public, given the platform of the DPP, is not going to be worried perhaps that she's going to sell out Taiwan. So in some sense maybe she's in a better position?

Rigger: Right, I think the DPP in general and Tsai Ing-wen in particular, because she's understood in Taiwan to be a really cautious and very, very smart politician. So I think the general sense of her in Taiwan is that she will be able to advocate for Taiwan with the mainland in a way that is neither kind of reckless and risky nor overly accommodating. So yeah, I think in some ways people make that comparison: Nixon to China. I'm not sure that she is going to turn out to be the Nixon, but I think she does have credibility within Taiwan

to talk to the PRC. The bigger question for me is whether the PRC will be able to find the confidence to talk to her.

Haenle: President Xi Jinping found the confidence to meet with Ma Ying-jeou recently on November 7. A historic, sudden meeting. I think it surprised a lot of people. First time the leaders of the PRC and Taiwan have met in sixty-six years. I just wanted to ask to get a sense from you, what do you think was behind the thinking of this, from both the PRC side and also Ma Ying-jeou and Taiwan?

Rigger: That was really a big shock to everybody I know who watches Taiwan. I'm sure there are people who claim they saw it coming, but I'm skeptical. Because for so long the idea of a meeting of political leaders was just beyond the pale. The PRC's position was, Taiwan is a local government, we're never going to engage the leaders over there as if they were the equals of our national leaders. So it's quite a breakthrough in the sense that it seems to me that the PRC decided not to worry about that anymore and to go ahead and have this meeting.

Why they decided to do that is a really interesting question and I think one of those things that historians will be studying for a very long time. But my sense for the moment at least is that for both Ma Ying-jeou and Xi Jinping, the purpose of this meeting was to show that they can have some significant accomplishments in cross-Strait relations. The election brings a lot of uncertainty into the picture, and in particular if Tsai Ing-wen wins it may be difficult for this kind of breakthrough. The PRC take on the DPP is that it's really not a party that's easy for the PRC to deal with—they don't really trust the DPP. So if there was going to be a breakthrough, if Xi Jinping was going to have a legacy of a big accomplishment in cross-Strait relations, the best opportunity for that within the remainder of Xi Jinping's presidency was before this election takes place. So I think what happened was President Xi decided, I want this, I have the authority to make it happen, and so he did.

Haenle: A window of opportunity before the presidential election.

Rigger: Right. But I think it has—certainly it has positive implications for the legacies of both Ma and Xi. But I think it also has some substantive value for cross-Strait relations because it raises the starting point. So if things become more difficult after the election, we're at 100, so maybe we can fall back to 90. If we started at 90, then we'd be falling back below that level. So I hope that the consequence of the meeting will be to contain the difficulty going forward and to allow for things to be a little bit better than they otherwise might be.

Haenle: And how about the reaction in Taiwan? Was it one of support? Was it one of concern? How did you assess the reaction there?

Rigger: I think some people were looking for ways to be critical because they have to criticize everything Ma does. But in the end, the criticism was relatively muted. And I think the reason for that is that they recognize this is a positive development. For example, Tsai Ing-wen criticized the secrecy of the planning for this event, but not the event itself.

Haenle: The big reason obviously that there has been in the Ma administration some positive developments, progress on the cross-Strait front, is that right away they were able to use the 1992 Consensus—different interpretations on both sides—as the framework for engaging one another. And that has allowed the two sides to engage. Tsai Ing-wen has already indicated if she is elected that she will not use the 1992 Consensus. So I imagine that there will be exploring of what framework can be used, and I imagine the U.S. administration will be very interested in that question. How do you see that playing out after the election? If Tsai Ing-wen does indeed win the presidency, how do you think she will handle this issue? How important is it?

Rigger: It seems to me that the DPP leadership, including Tsai Ing-wen, really has a strong interest and desire to see cross-Strait relations sustained in a stable fashion. So they're not looking to have sharp gains, but they don't want the relationship to fall off a cliff either. And up to now, Tsai's position has been that she wants to articulate a package of positions that are close enough to be kind of recognizable as consistent with the '92 Consensus and the previous line-up of wordings that the two sides have used, without actually using the same words that the KMT likes to use or has created as the framework.

So she says, I want to go forward on the basis of the ROC constitution and all of the interpretations around that, and I also want to move forward on the foundation of 20 plus years of achievements in cross-Strait relations. So that's a kind of endorsement of lots of things that the PRC likes, without actually saying, articulating, or naming those things in an endorsement. The question is, is that enough?

Right now, our friends here in Beijing and elsewhere in the PRC are really insisting that is not enough. She really needs to say something clearer and more forthrightly in support of the idea that Taiwan and the mainland are both parts of China. Whether there's a way to get to yes, without either side really giving up essential parts of its position, no one can really say. But I think there is a will to try between the election and the inauguration. And I think that is where those of us who are in conversation with both sides can at least try and feel out the two sides and see whether there is anything floating around out there that might be useful.

Right now, I think for understandable reasons, the mainland side is not really willing to say, how about this? How about that? To actually offer wording. But I hope that there are opportunities for the two sides to exchange some thoughts about what might work.

Haenle: Not a lot of upside in advance of the elections—I don't think—for Tsai Ing-wen to be exploring these issues, but potentially between the election and the inauguration, when some of this will take place.

You've been here now for three or four days as part of the Carnegie-Tsinghua Distinguished Speaker Program, engaging a number of different communities: academic, think tanks, business, diplomatic. Just be curious some of your takeaways from this week. Any

surprises? Do you leave more optimistic or more pessimistic, do you leave Beijing today on the issue of Taiwan?

Rigger: Usually, we think, in the Taiwan watcher world, we think Beijing is the—that's the scary part of China. I spend a lot of time in Shanghai and I haven't been to Beijing in a long time. In Shanghai, the image of Shanghai is that it's more free-thinking and you can talk about a lot of things and people are more willing to explore outside the box and that sort of thing. So I came to Beijing with a little bit of trepidation. Am I going to get a spanking here? Told all the things that I need to hear?

But actually I found our conversations very—they've given me quite a bit more optimism. I've heard the word patience a lot, including some of the Chinese officials that we've talked to. That they feel they can have patience in dealing with Taiwan. And I think that the scholars that we've talked to have been in this sort of creative mode. And I want to give President Xi some credit for that. I think the Xi-Ma meeting, which as far as I can discern was a pretty Xi-centered initiative—I don't think is something that bubbled up from below. I think President Xi was driving that. And I think in doing so, he has given permission to others in his government to think, alright, maybe we can try some other things. So it seems to me that the atmosphere is a lot less anxious, rigid, negative, than I would have thought it would be in the run-up to an election where the DPP is leading by double digits.

Haenle: Well, the outcome—if it is the DPP—even though different than the previous Chen Shui-bian administration, I think there will be a greater need for engagement, discussion, reassurances, clarifications, and so in that context, we welcome you back to this scary place. It shouldn't be as scary. You have a home here now at Carnegie-Tsinghua as our fifteenth Distinguished Speaker. We consider you part of the family, so you're welcome back anytime. And thank you very much for spending time with us this week and on the podcast today.

Rigger: Well, thank you. It's really been a great visit.